GOD COMES THROUGH THE LINE
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Psalm 66:1–12
Matthew 23:37–39
Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7

"Seek the welfare of the city,
pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare."
Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSV)

Two things are absolutely essential to the church: Jesus Christ and human need.
In that place where the church dwells are the rich and the poor,
the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless.
There are those who are educated and those who are ignorant.
There are those who believe and those who don't believe.
There are the high and the mighty and the lowly who nobody knows.
In between is the Church of Jesus Christ. The church is called to help both the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless.
The church is to be the gospel for all these people.
As long as you have Christ and as long as you have needs,
you have the church.

Fred Craddock
While the Minister Is in Jail:
Cherry Log Sermons

You are sitting in a pew in a city church this morning, located in one of the busiest, most urban neighborhoods in the third-largest metropolitan area in the United States. It is hard to be more of a city church than this one. And so my attention was grabbed, literally, when I read the following paragraph. It's in Michael Lindvall's new book, *A Geography of God*, and he's quoting E. F. Schumacher:

> On a visit to Leningrad some years ago I consulted a map to find out where I was, but I could not make it out. From where I stood, I could see several enormous churches, yet there was no trace of any of them on the map. When finally an interpreter came to help me, he said, "We don't show churches on our maps." Contradicting

> him, I pointed to one that was very clearly marked. “That is a museum” he said. (p. 4)

The Soviet experiment failed in many ways. Leningrad is now St. Petersburg; the museums are now churches again, and they are clearly marked on the maps. But the anecdote seized my attention because it illustrated the interesting and somewhat fragile relationship the church of Jesus Christ—and behind and beneath it the gospel of Jesus Christ—has with the city, with what Harvard theologian Harvey Cox once famously called “The Secular City.”

Cox loves cities, as I do—recalls that with the exception of a three-year exile in Ohio, he has spent his entire adult life in cities; has been mugged in Chicago, burglarized in Boston, nearly asphyxiated in Mexico City, interrogated by border guards in Berlin, hopelessly lost in the Tokyo subway system; and has loved every minute of it (see *Envisioning the New City*, p. 15).

I agree. I’ve loved and been fascinated by the city ever since I was taken on a train ride from western Pennsylvania when I was seven to Philadelphia to see William Penn on top of the city hall and museums, and then on to New York City, the Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, a matinee at Radio City Music Hall (the movie was *Anna and the King of Siam,* which tells you how old this story is), dinner at the Automat, also ancient history. I’ve been in love ever since, and when we arrived for the first time in Chicago to attend divinity school, drove up Lake Shore Drive in evening traffic, with the sparkling lake on one side and the great wall of Michigan Avenue buildings on the other, we knew we were where we wanted to be. We returned to the city from two Indiana communities every chance we had, for dinner, theater, museums, music, brought little children on hot summer evenings to sit on a blanket in Grant Park and listen to the orchestra. And so when the call came to be here, it was and still is the thrill and blessing of my life.

In his latest book, *Mandate to Difference,* Walter Brueggemann observes that the city occupies a complex place in biblical faith and that “much of the Protestant tradition has been suspicious of and resistant toward the city.”

Churches have lived somewhat uneasily in the city. Certainly in the 1960s, when American center cities seemed to be under siege, many downtown churches sold their property and relocated in the relative safety and stability of the suburbs.

Brueggemann argues that the church must not do that: abandon the city geographically—or spiritually, theologically, missionally. It is in the city, after all, Brueggemann argues, where human life is most intense: great universities, great hospitals. Cities are where the markets are and the banks, where wealth is earned, accumulated, invested and flaunted. Cities are where the information is organized, edited, and disseminated—through newspapers, television and radio stations. The city is where art flourishes: museums, symphony orchestras, and great architecture. The city is where human power and weakness are on display: greed and benevolence, corruption and altruism.

The city, it has always seemed to me, is where human life is lived, full speed, full volume, life as full of energy and passion as possible. It is also where major league baseball is played, which for me significantly increases the allure. One final anecdote, saved for this day in case the Cubs were still playing, and even though they are not, I'm still going to use it. It is biblical. Near the end of the season, after the Cubs had taken a series from the St. Louis Cardinals in St. Louis, virtually ending the Cardinals' hope for the playoffs, I received an envelope from Columbia Theological Seminary, from Professor Walter Brueggemann, one of the most distinguished Old Testament scholars in the world. Walter is also a Cardinals fan. I opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of personalized note paper on which was scribbled "Isaiah 47:6." That's all. I looked it up and found

> I was angry with my people . . . ;
> I gave them into your hand,
> you showed them no mercy;
> on the aged you made your yoke
> exceedingly heavy.

I answered, of course. A simple sheet of note paper with this sole citation: 1 Corinthians 15:52—"For the trumpet shall sound and the dead will be raised"—which, as it turned out, was a little too optimistic.

Now other than the fact that the Cubs and Cardinals play in cities, this has nothing to do with the sermon, and I promise not to bring it up again—at least until next year.

Not everyone loves the city. Some people are overwhelmed by it and can't wait to leave. Some people I know are proud of the fact that they never come to the city for any reason. Traffic, congestion, noise, fire engines and ambulances, crime, slums, homeless people asking for a handout on every corner. It is easy to romanticize the city when you

are privileged. But the city is also a hard place, in our case a place where politicians a generation ago decided that public housing would not be racially integrated and created the nightmare of Cabrini-Green. The city, where there are too many drugs and easily available guns, is not a safe place for youngsters who can be killed walking to school. The city is not a wonderful place for an unemployed single mother with a sick child. For some people, the city is the sum of all that is wrong with the human condition: greed, violence, corruption, dysfunction, poverty, and despair.

But deep in our biblical and theological tradition there is a unique word about the city and our relationship with and role in it. It's the sixth century BCE. Jerusalem has been leveled, and its people, its leading citizens, carried back to Babylon to live in captive exile. How to carry on? How to live as God's people in a foreign land, an alien culture, a strange city? Conventional wisdom would be to remain apart, isolated. Have as little to do as possible with the strange city and its citizens. Withdraw, keep to yourselves, wall yourself in and practice your particular customs, rituals, religion in isolation from the threat of alien Babylon. And then the exiled community received a very surprising bit of advice. It came in the form of a letter written by one of their prophets, Jeremiah, who still was back in ruined Jerusalem. This is what he advised:

> Build houses and live in them;
> Plant gardens and eat what they produce;
> Take wives and husbands, have children.

That is to say, settle in, live there, be part of the community.

And then this surprising mandate:

> Seek the welfare of the city,
> pray to the Lord on its behalf,
> for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

That is the job description, mission statement, and strategic plan for every city church: the city is important, precious—seek the welfare of the city, pray for the city, for in the city's welfare you will find your welfare.

There is a critical theological assertion in that. There has always been within the Christian tradition the suspicion that this world is a fallen, corrupt, and sinful place and the city is a kind of concentration of all that is fallen, sinful, corrupt, and that the purpose of religion is to deliver us from this fallen, sinful world—in religious practices that

direct our attention away from the world and all its temptations—and later to deliver us safely to another world when we die. “Come apart,” that tradition tells us: keep yourself clean and undefiled by the dirt and grime of real human life. Insofar as possible, forget about your body and its annoying needs and appetites; focus instead on your soul. It has always been a temptation for Christian people and Christian churches to turn away from the world and particularly from the city where all that is wrong and fallen and sinful about the world is on display.

One of the great historical divisions within Protestant Christianity is along this fault line. In the past, the mainline churches mostly kept alive the notion that our business is the world: that suffering people in the world become our agenda. The evangelicals, on the other hand, focused on the soul, salvation, getting to heaven. And one of the wonderful developments in our time is that the old division is healing and disappearing. Jim Wallis, a generous and passionate evangelical, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, and popular author, urges his evangelical friends to pay more attention to scripture, which has a lot more to say about poverty and justice than it does about sex. Wallis criticizes the religious right for restricting the conversation about values to two issues—abortion and gay marriage—and to simply ignoring Jesus’ own concern for the marginalized, sick, oppressed, and poor.

Pray for the city; seek the city’s welfare.

The simple fact is that Jesus not only lived thoroughly in the world but apparently loved the world very much. The simple fact is that he spent much, if not most, of his time with people whose needs were urgent and worldly: sick people, outcast people, poor people, hungry people. The simple fact is that when the time came to sum up his life and its meaning, he chose to come to the city and lamented and wept over it, which is to say, loved it dearly too.

There is a secret: deep spirituality and active social mission are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a spirituality based on Jesus finds its depth in intentional involvement in the world and service to its people.

In his book *Simply Christian*, British scholar and Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright says that the purpose of the church is not merely to get us to a better place when we die: “We’re called here and now to be instruments of God’s new creation which has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus’ followers are supposed to be . . . its agents” (p. 225). Wright makes the intriguing suggestion that God has placed in our hearts a longing for justice, for a world put right; that

God has made us dissatisfied with war and greed and violence; and that we give voice to our hope, our purpose, every time we say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This church is clear about it. Our purpose is to pray for the city and seek the welfare of the city, with confidence in the old promise that in the city’s welfare is our own welfare. We make a major investment in that purpose—providing for the city and its people: a Social Service Center, which receives homeless and hungry guests every day; a Counseling Center; a Center for Life and Learning; a Center for Whole Health; a Children’s Center for day care; a Day School; a Magnet School Cluster program that invests in creative, community-based public education; a Tutoring Program that touches the lives of 400 youngsters a week; a Scholarship program for promising students; and a Summer Day program for 120 or so city youngsters. We do all of that as a way of responding to the mandate to seek the welfare of the city and by serving the people we believe Jesus would serve and calls us to serve in his name. You are part of that mission as you pledge and contribute to and participate in the life of this church.

One part of the mission is a little less visible: Sunday Night Supper, Monday Night Supper, Friday Night Supper. For more than ten years, Fourth Church volunteers, joined by volunteers from other churches and two synagogues, have provided a nutritious meal for hungry men and women every Sunday evening in our Dining Room. Three years ago our Deacons began Monday Night Supper, renting facilities at Catholic Charities on LaSalle Street. And just recently we helped launch a Friday Night Supper in cooperation with Holy Name Cathedral, again renting facilities at Catholic Charities. Each program provides a nutritious meal for 100 to 150 hungry, mostly homeless men and women. We are approaching the goal of a good nutritious meal available every night of the week for hungry people in this very affluent neighborhood.

Earlier this year the Monday Night Supper crew celebrated the third anniversary of the program. There was lively music by a jazz combo, homemade pastry for dessert, flowers on the tables, and each guest was given a pencil and paper on which to write responses, suggestions, complaints, whatever they wanted to say.

Marilyn wrote, “This is my first time ever being homeless and I never envisioned myself in this position. But when I walked through the doors here for dinner it gave me a picture of the life I had and gave hope to get it back. Thank you very much.”

Dean said, “When I come here, I get full. I never left hungry. God bless this place.”

Benny wrote, “Every time one of your volunteers smiles, pours an iced tea for a dinner guest, you are reflecting the love of Jesus. . . . The team always makes you feel like you are someone. Don’t change a thing, unless you had more food. Thank you, Fourth Presbyterian Church.”

Jim Wallis tells about the evening supper at Sojourners in Washington, D.C. Mary Glover, a volunteer, a sixty-year-old African American woman who knows what it is to be poor, says a prayer every evening for the volunteers before the guests arrive. Mary knows how to pray, Wallis says: “She thanks God for the gift of another day. Then she prays: ‘Lord, we know that you’ll be coming through the line today, so help us to treat you well” (*Envisioning the New City*, p. 56).

That is the basic Christian message, the bold proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ: “God is coming through the line tonight.” In Jesus Christ, God calls us to serve the city, to pray for it, and seek its welfare and promises to meet us in every person who is helped, encouraged, comforted, served.

And one thing more. In that same Jesus Christ, God comes to each one of us, whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we are doing: in our volunteering, our serving, but also in our working, our playing, our parenting, our loving, our hoping and dreaming, our suffering, and our dying.

God comes through the line. God comes to the city. God comes, in Jesus Christ, to you and me—to guide, uphold, prod, inspire, strengthen, comfort and hold, forever.

Amen.